



The Sliders



sci-fi

thriller

horror

142 14 4

Chapter 1 by intellikat

A dimly lit stone spiral staircase ever descending into the gloom stood. For hours now you have followed its smooth steps into the bowels of the unknown. But something is about to change.

The next hour is a troubling one for you. Not only are your knees starting to hurt, but you have this nagging feeling that you're missing something. As crazy as it seems, every twenty minutes or so you get this sense that you're missing an important clue. The next time it happens you stop in your tracks and carefully look around.

There!

Recessed into the side wall is a small grey button. There's been one every twenty minutes and you've been seeing them all along, and yet ignoring them. How to interpret this? Some kind of internal warning system-- a sixth sense? The button could be dangerous.

You push such thoughts from your mind and press the button and the stairs start to vibrate. With a deep grating sound, they start to MOVE. Each stair is rotating-- down as far as you can

see the stair case is changing-- turning into a perfectly smooth slide! That's when you notice there's no handrail.

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uncomfortable ride in any way. No bumps or ridges, and there seems to be a kind of channel down the middle of the slide-- an indentation that keeps your body centered in the middle and safely away from the high sides around you. You have no idea how long you have already been descending, but after what feels like a good half of an hour, you begin to doze off.

When you open your eyes again the slide has ended on a very soft surface. You stand up and try to get your footing, but realize your legs are weak from what must have been a very long descent. As you walk, you seem to bounce a little on the soft rubbery ground.

In this huge area is a crystal lake with a charming cottage on the other side. You begin to walk slowly around the edge of the water, but suddenly feel some strange uneasiness inside you. You think you're getting sick, but then realize that this feeling isn't purely physical. It's like a part of you is missing, and rests across the water. Some... force makes you stare across at a cottage, where these feelings seem to be leading you. You have no choice. You jump in and head for it.

You reach the shore after about a five-minute swim. Back in the mundane world, you always prided yourself on your swimming ability. You stand in the pale sunlight, and suddenly wish that water wasn't so wet. And COLD! You should have thought about that before you jumped into the lake. You hope that whoever lives in the cottage has a nice big fireplace, and also will not eat you alive. It does, after all, look rather like the pictures of witch's cottages you have seen in books. Well, if you get boiled alive, at least you'll be warm.

You knock on the heavy wooden door.

No answer.

You are about to bang harder, but you hear some noise coming from behind the cottage. It sounds a lot like a blacksmith pounding on some metal contraption.

You come around the cottage and see a man hammering with all his might on a piece of red-hot metal. Talk about all his might! This guy looks like he could lift the state of New Jersey. He looks up from his work, sees you, sees that you are turning blue from the cold, and invites you to come and sit by his fire.

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Partner, you look like you

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The large man disappears into the back of the cottage and reemerges with two steaming cups of rich black coffee. You ease over towards the hot coals to warm up-- you wrap your hands around the mug, taking great pleasure from its warmth. It surprises you, yet it seems... natural. The blacksmith has a warm, friendly way about him, a manner of behaving that you just don't encounter topside. And he seems to KNOW. Just know about you.

With a gentle smile he asks, "So, did you come down the slide?" Almost without pausing, he continues. "Sure you did. That's just fine... I can see you're unhurt-- it's a rare occasion when someone is hurt coming down that chute, but I'm just glad you're okay. Aw, everyone will be glad to hear that! After you get warmed up, I'll give you a change of clothes and we can head over to town so you can meet everybody." With a gentle, lumbering smile he concludes, "Yup, you're sure going to like it here."

As you down the last of your coffee, you look around the back yard of this smithy's house. You notice there is a feminine touch to the area. There are trees in full bloom and fragrant flowers. As if he's noticed you looking around the man speaks.

"Gladys, my wife, was a slider just like you. I had it lonely for the longest time and she came in and spruced up the place. Me, too. Yes, sir. She's a real cutie. By the way, my name is Doug. What's yours?"

You tell him your name and he invites you in to try and get some dry clothing.

"Gladys is in town and I promised to meet her for lunch. I don't want her to get upset at me for being late so we'd better hurry. There should be something in here to fit you. Help yourself."

He shows you to a room in the house that seems to be the guest room. The bed is neatly made and there is a vase of freshly cut flowers on the bedside table. You open the closet and find men's and women's clothing hanging there. Everything has been neatly pressed. You choose a pair of Levis and a white shirt. Looking at the floor of the closet, you notice a new pair of Reeboks (just your size). You put them on.

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Doug leans back in his seat. "I was going to meet Gladys for a quick lunch, just enough time for a snack really, before we're due at the meeting. That should suit you, I think the meeting should answer a few questions you've built up. Well, that's just fine. But for now let's get you something to eat."

Doug seems to have this special power to relax you. You wouldn't exactly call it coercion, you seem to agree with what he suggests, it's just that all of your questions and doubts seem to melt away when he talks. They melt into a soothing, relaxing sort of... hazy state.

You bounce along in the strange vehicle, eyes fixed ahead on the road. The road is actually a slightly elevated dirt track that runs through a farmland. Alongside the road runs an endless row of grand oak trees. The repetitiveness of it all, plus Doug's pleasant drawling all serve to put you to sleep. You doze off for some time.

With a jolt, you awaken-- You're in town. A big town, at that. Doug has pulled the carriage into a parking slot on the edge of a town square. There are dozens and dozens of other similar carriages all around. Modest shops and restaurants line the streets, but towering over all is a great cathedral-like building several stories tall. A few hundred people mill about on the square, and a few are going into the great hall. You look about for a minute or so, taking it all in, and then just before you start to turn around, Doug is right there taking your arm.

He leads you across the street towards a small diner. A pretty woman sits in the window, smiling and watching the two of you approach.

"Hey, there she is! You ready?" Doug speaks, his hand gently laid upon your shoulder.

As you step into the diner, you feel immediately at home.

"Hi, Doug," says a cute little waitress behind the counter who smiles in your direction. "Another slider?"

"Yen" replies Doug. "Bring us a couple of cups of coffee and another of whatever Gladys is drinking will ya Amy? Thanks."

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You take a moment to look at your surroundings. This place looks like something out of the '50s... a little mom n' pop diner. A cozy place really. The aroma of home cooked food wafts through the air. Yet something is strange-- everyone in here acts as though they know each other and EVERYONE is happy. All the tables and stools are full and everyone is smiling and cheerful.

"I don't get it," you think to yourself.

By this time, you've reached the table where Gladys is waiting patiently for you and her loving husband. Doug gives Gladys a warm and loving kiss as you look on.

"Another slider?" she asks Doug looking in your direction.

"Yeah, he has arrived and I think he'll fit right in. I've invited him to the meeting with us. We'd better get our food and get moving."

The waitress, Amy, magically appears at the table with the coffee and a glass of tea for Gladys. Amy is smiling at you.

"Can I take your order?" she asks to no one in particular but looks at you. Doug laughs.

"Sure can, Amy." Amy smiles and disappears. How odd.

You are introduced to Gladys and the three of you spend a little time just chatting about town life. Neither of your lunch companions seem concerned with ordering, or even with menus. You see that there are no menus in this diner, people just seem to arrive and then receive food. Soon that happens to your table too-- Amy appears out of nowhere, drops three hot plates of food and is gone.

You dig in. The food is delicious! You've never tasted anything so good, and for a minute you eat steadily, not even looking up. Doug and his wife are looking at you and smiling. There's something about this food... A warm, woozy feeling overtakes your brain-- you close your eyes

and let it wash over and past you, enjoying. Opening your eyes a few seconds later, everything looks the same, but there's a new feeling. In the room you have a strange feeling. A new kind of feeling. You look at Doug and Gladys. "What's going on?" you ask. "I'm not a blind man? It's as if you've been handed a six." Doug and Gladys look at each other and then at you. You spin around in your seat and there is Amy, leaning against the counter, smiling at you.

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Doug is speaking softly in Gladys ear as she giggles, so you slip from the table and make your way to the counter.

"Hi," you say to Amy.

She nods, still smiling. "Going to the meeting today?"

"Yes," you project, unsteadily, "Yes. Are you?"

"Of course."

"Maybe we can sit together." You're not sure how those words made their way from your lips.

"Sure!" She smiles and nods enthusiastically before walking to the back of the diner.

You watch her for a moment as she clears a table before you return to your seat. Doug and Gladys are smiling at each other, and at you.

"I told you he was quick, didn't I?" Beams Doug, eyeing you.

"Yes, yes you did dear." Gladys is gathering her things,

"Now we'd better get going."

The three of you rise and prepare to leave the diner. Most of the other patrons have already left. Through the front windows you can see them all in the square, converging on the great hall. Amy appears from the kitchen, no longer wearing an apron.

As if they knew what you were thinking, Gladys and Doug excuse themselves with a sideways glance. Amy comes to your side and offers her arm. You link yours in hers and lead her through the diner door. Once outside, you stop and take a deep cleansing breath. Everything seems right. There's not a cloud in the sky, the birds are singing.

Suddenly, you notice something else: there are no overhead cables. No telephone wires, no electric cables. Odd you think, but you are distracted away as Amy appears by your side and takes your hand. You notice that everyone is smiling. Everyone is smiling.

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"This is incredible," you think to yourself.

You look over at Amy. She's smiling at you. The possibilities of this gift are endless. You look at some of the other couples. They are smiling and nodding without really saying anything. As you stare at one couple, their conversation comes to you. They look in your direction and smile and say hello before continuing on their way.

"This is unbelievable," you say to no one in particular.

"You'll get used to it in time," says Amy with a little giggle. Where has this girl been all your life? She seems so perfect.

As you near the Great Town Hall, you notice its resemblance to a large cathedral. There is a large bell tower with 8 relatively small bells hanging inside. There are 4 spires, one at each corner of the building. All the windows are stained glass but none depict a religious scene or really there are no people depicted in the glass, just designs.

Upon entering the massive brick building you notice that there are few people just milling around. They turn to greet you as you enter and congratulate you on your journey. A few others welcome you to their neighborhood and add with a chuckle that they hope you'll be happy here. There's no time to wonder what that was all about because Amy is steering you down the aisle in the main hall. It is set up with row upon row of pews, most of them occupied by smiling people, most of whom seem to be smiling in your direction. As Amy steers you to a pew next to Doug and Gladys, an organ starts to play. Everyone settles down and there is a sense of great anticipation in the air.

In no time every pew is filled and a quiet hush falls over the crowd. You've had a strange buzzing feeling in your head for the last few minutes, but that too has stopped and you realize what has happened: all the telepathy has stopped. You've never felt so peaceful and yet excited at the same time. What is going to happen? It soon becomes clear that whatever it is, you're going to be waiting awhile for it to come. Everyone seems relaxed in their seats, but they're

concentrating on something.

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That's when you notice a change. As you look about the great hall you notice two things. The first is about your self. No longer do you feel like an outsider. It seems some kind of subtle barrier has gone down. As if a collective effort had been steering your thoughts in a

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certain direction but now that presence has vanished and your mind is again free to wander. And with that presence gone, you notice the other change: Your surroundings are not quite as you had perceived them a few minutes ago. The hall is different.

The great stained-glass windows are just dusty old plain glass, a few of the panes broken. Outside, the sky is a dull, cold grey, and you can see power lines running past in the distance. The vast sea of candles all around the hall are now gone, replaced by a few bare bulbs strung up on wires. You are surrounded by frumpy, disheveled people in tattered clothes, sitting on row upon row of mismatched old benches.

Then you notice the scrap of paper in your hand. Opening it up, you see this written in a hurried scrawl:

DON'T BELIEVE IT. THINGS ARE NOT AS THEY SEEM. DON'T BELIEVE IT! EVERY NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT YOU CAN CONTACT US BY LISTENING FOR TH-

The paper vanishes, your mind twinges slightly, and the room brightens up. Someone is again monitoring your thoughts, someone is looking at you.

You look up to see a six year old boy leaning over the back of the pew in front of you. He has a peculiar way of looking at you, peculiar for a six year old anyway. He is smiling at you, but it scares you. Why? The boy is ever so slightly shaking his head as he smiles. He turns back around and slumps down in his seat, his head vanishing below the back of the pew.

Golden sunlight streams through the great stained glass... You shake your head in disbelief. Did that really happen? You dare not think about that too much right now, in case someone is **listening**. You look around you. Everything is as it was when you walked in. Everyone seems happy and relaxed.

Amy nudges you and says "Please relax. This won't hurt. You'll see. Trust me. It'll help." She smiles that sweet smile that first drew you to her and you feel you have to do as she says, for

Now

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You tilt your head back and let your eyes close. A warm, golden light washes over you again. No one is watching you. You are in the heart of the story. The paper is there once again in your hands and the

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--DON'T BELIEVE IT! EVERY NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT YOU CAN CONTACT US BY LISTENING FOR THE BELLS. WE WILL BE IN THE TOWER. BE CAREFUL. BE AWARE.

What in the world? How could this sweet girl next to you be anything but what she seems to be? You relax again. You've got that feeling that you're being watched. It's that little boy again. You try to project a message of friendship to him but it seems he doesn't want to be your friend.

"Be one with us or you won't BE," comes the answer from his direction.

You look around to see if anyone else **heard** but they are all concentrating. You join in. There is a voice that seems to come from nowhere and everywhere at once.

"Hello friends and neighbors. Welcome one and all. We have a new friend in our midst. He came down the slide this morning and is here as a guest of Doug and Gladys have made him welcome so far. I'm sure someone here can help him find a place to stay. Mr. Simonson has said he can give him a job in his deli. Welcome, friend, welcome. May you make many new friends here in our little town. We all help each other. Now.... in other news, as they say, I'm sorry to report that Vera Nichols has gone on. She could no longer lift or carry things at the bakery. She'll be missed, I'm sure. Michael and Samantha York have announced that they are expecting a new arrival of their own late this year. Congratulations in advance on the new baby. I know you're both happy. Well, unless there are any questions, that is all for now. Happy living."

The voice just seems to vanish-- ceasing to exist, if it ever did. Weird. You look and the boy is taking his father's hand and getting up to leave.

Seeing you, the boy's father says, "We run a boarding house. You're welcome to a room until a place can be found for you."

"Thank you." you reply, suspiciously eyeing the boy. "I'll be there later."

You've got this feeling that something, anything could happen to you. It's a strange feeling.

Doug and Gladys walk you to the boarding house

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Now you are left standing on the sidewalk with Amy. She says she'll stay with you a while if you want her to. As comforting a thought as that is, you ask her to help show you around town after work tomorrow. Today you'd just like a room and a bed. She says she understands and that she'll see you tomorrow.

The room you are given at the boarding house overlooks the Grand Hall. In a way this unnerves you but in some ways (thinking of the piece of paper) it gives you a sense of calm. Your room is simple, it has a bed, a dresser with a mirror on top, and a recliner that faces a roaring fire in the fireplace.

The bed is firm and comfortable and you sit down on it, immediately settling in to a relaxed kind of daze. Outside your window, the late afternoon sky is a deep blue, and you see trees blowing in a light breeze. The fire crackles away in the fireplace and all seems right. What could really be so wrong about this place, anyway? What was I thinking? You settle back on your bed and are soon asleep.

Your dreams come quickly and they are troubling ones. They are a mix of emotions and visions, some of them your own, others seemingly broadcasted in. You can't separate the two, they seem to be fighting it out with each other inside your mind: The town square, the grand hall, the **other** hall... Amy's smiling face, Doug's buggy and the endless sleep-inducing rows of oak trees...The piece of paper-- a quick movement as a scrawny hand stuffs it into your hand...The tube... your mind keeps returning to the slide down the tube. So much sleeping around here, you even arrived sleeping! What is the tube, what happened in the tube? Visions of your self, half asleep and shooting down, down, down. Images flashing across your eyes, mixing with the speeding rock walls... messages and visions in the rock. Rushing. Stopping. Rushing again. You... stopped for a while in the tube, a net stopped you, and...? You see faces, labeled foods, and unfamiliar maps. Enemies and friends that you haven't even met. The past and the future melt together and become one. The young boy smiles at you, his eyes are blood red. Joy and horror, tranquility and deception...The bell tower is aflame, people are running, screaming, then the next instant it is as before, peaceful.

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Eventually this portion of the dream fades. You are sure that Bob and Henry are evil... and you can't shake the vision of the tube. The tube means something... it all seems a great puzzle, something important happened in the tube.

You awaken.

The room is undisturbed. The fire has almost died out and the sky is dark, though it is not late: Outside, you see that the town square is quite full. You turn on a light and open a window, standing there for a few minutes to take in the scene. Couples are idly strolling hand in hand, occasionally stopping to look up at the skies. Colored lanterns line the walkways and a few young children are running in circles, yelling and laughing. After such a disturbing nap the outside certainly looks inviting.

Chapter 2 by Grasshopper



Looking up to the sky you see the moon is cresting the horizon, illuminating the bottoms of the big puffy clouds. You stand there and watch as the moon blooms into full view with the bottoms of the clouds become a light baby blue and the tops look like they had been dipped in chocolate. You're captivated by the constant parade of these gentle giants gliding across the sky. You feel that buzzing again and see the clouds turn auburn red. You watch as the clouds morph into a brick wall as if the night sky was but a veil, and the moon is a streetlight that reveals what's behind it. You close your eyes in disbelief, and count to three. When you open them everything was normal again. Startled, you close the window and stumble back. You turn off the light, hop in bed and cover your head with the sheets.

You wake to a rapping on your door. You look towards the window and see that its daytime again. You moan "Come In". You're greeted with the warm glow of Doug's face peeking around the corner. "Come on, get cleaned up. A new day is **calling**" as he points to a large pot of water and bowl. "Today is your first day of work with Mr. Simonson, and you want to make a good impression". You got up and looked at the pot and bowl and in your mind you could hear how to use them and where the towels were. Doug hands you a package bound by paper and twine.

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can go the diner first and see Amy... to get something to eat"? Doug and Gladys grinned at each other as he helped her up.

Doug parks the carriage in the square, and then helps Gladys down. His hand gently laid upon your shoulder once again was reassuring, and then he and Gladys join arms. At first you felt that it was odd that someone was always escorting you around but when you look across the square and see that most everyone was paired or at least touching others in one form or another, it just seems natural for them. As you enter the diner there was a welcoming smile waiting for you. "Come sit with us when you're ready" Doug said. Amy's smile thinned then she bit her lip "So, today's the big day. You'll love working for Mr. Simonson. Go ahead and have a seat and I'll be with you in a moment". The two love birds were whispering then giggled as you sat down. Instantly an arm reached across the table with cups of coffee and a tea. Amy motions then sits down next to you. "Close your eyes and put out your hands" she sung with an alluring voice. When you opened your eyes Amy looked happy and chase. "Surprise"! You look down and see a pocket watch with a bow around it. "This way you'll know when to pick me up for the gathering". You blushed as the couple across **from** you laughed with joy. She reaches over and gives you a big hug followed by a quick peck on the cheek then disappeared. "Thank....." as you look around for her. This time she brought a different meal but it came with the same sensation.

We finished our meals then we walked over to the deli. Mr. Simonson was opening the place as we came up. "So this is the lad you told me about. Yes, I think he will fit in just fine". Doug and Gladys say their goodbyes and Mr. Simonson "No, you can call me Hank" handed you an apron and showed you around the place. "Sit here and watch for a while so you can get an idea of how the place works". You watch as the first customer walks in and up to the counter. He starts wrapping some ham in paper then hands it to her for which she nods her head to him and walks away. "I take that everyone has an account with you then pays later" you ask. Hank looks at you puzzled "Oh, that! We are beyond any type of currency to speak of. We all put in our fair share of labor for which the fruits of are distributed equally". "So I'm not getting paid in other words" you ask. "Where did you sleep? What are you wearing? What have you ate? It is now your turn to contribute". Feeling a little embarrassed you follow his lead to the back. "I used the last bit of

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You look at the gutted pig then place your hand on it. It feels cold and wet. As you start the first cut you immediately feel dizzy. Your vision goes flat but you keep cutting. You feel the rush of warm blood pulsing over you. You feel the pig fighting to get away but you grasp it harder and keep sawing. When you close your eyes you feel faintly sick but then it feels as if you are rising above yourself. You look down but the view is of a dark alley and two men struggling behind a dumpster. A homeless man is kicking and hitting the other man which was knelling before him. You can see the darkness of the blood corrupting the rain filled pavement. You feel yourself spinning, spiraling, and falling back down. The warmth of the blood dripping from your face, the pig struggling to get away. As you feel it's life fade, you open your eye only to see a small cut on the pig's neck. You look around and in you're amazement, there's no blood, and the **side** of your face was dry and clean. You drop the knife and stand back for a moment clutching the wrist that was sore from the heavy sawing. Suddenly you feel a calmness flow over you as Hank walks back to see how you're doing. You pick up the knife and proceed to carve it up as expected.

Chapter 3 by intellikat



The rest of the day proceeds without event. Hank is pleased with how well you have carved the pig; it almost embarrasses you how he begins to gush.

"Of course you must know our new addition," says Hank to a young couple who enters the deli. "He's a real natural, he is."

"Oh?" The couple perks up.

"Most certainly. I think I'll have him try a side of beef tomorrow."

Hank laughs and places a thick, warm hand on your shoulder. It reminds **you** of your own father. Your own father? You hadn't thought of him since--

"Break time," says Hank, handing you a large paper cup full of coffee.

You both drink and Hank speaks a bit more about the various meats and cheeses in the counter

cooler. You find yourself lulled by his voice and forget what it was you were thinking only moments before. Hank's warm hand stays on your shoulder as he smiles warmly to your face. The coffee finished, you return to the counter. Hank's smile fades and he tells you the deli shuts down.

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"I'll see you at the gathering," says Hank, closing the front door. You notice there is not even a lock built into the door, but things like this don't seem to surprise you anymore. You look up to the beautiful sky. Yet another perfect sunset, it seems.

You meet Amy at the diner and take her arm. It has become completely natural already in just your second day to do so, and though the early flutters you felt have subsided a bit, you still feel warm and energized around this beautiful girl. You simply can't believe your luck.

Sitting at a pew in the main hall for the gathering once again, you slip your hand into Amy's and listen to the organ play. People are looking back at you, nodding, smiling, murmuring gently. Very soon, the same sense of calm comes over you, and it is as if a mental weight has been lifted. The scene shifts, and once again you **are in** an old hall with bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling

Remembering the previous evening, you look down at your hands and see another scrap of paper there.

THE THIRD DAY IS WHEN THEY WILL TAKE YOU. YOU MUST JOIN US TONIGHT. LISTEN FOR THE BELLS, PLEASE!!! AMY.

You jerk your eyes up to Amy beside you. She is looking intently at you, and suddenly you realize that she looks different as well. Though she is as beautiful as she was a moment ago, you notice a series of deep scars running down along the side of her neck. Her left cheek looks bruised and swollen. And she is missing several fingers from the hand holding yours.

You jerk back in horror, and the scene shifts back to the **great** and glorious hall as it was before.

You look around you and see that another pair of eyes is on you now. It is Doug. His face looks now impassive and unsmiling. He seems to nudge Gladys silently with his shoulder and she turns to look at you unblinkingly as well. You return your glance to your empty hands, and then to the scene in front of you.

A voice sneaks once again from nowhere and everywhere

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friend, we hope you are enjoying your life with us here. Now.... in other news, I'm very sorry to report that Sara Abramson has passed. Also her husband Dane, on the very same day. Since the Abramsons were both teachers, the **danger** we face is that our cherished young ones will suffer a lapse in their education. For this reason, we have expeditiously appointed Shawn and Lauren Culver to the Abramson's roles at the schoolhouse. Let us give them thanks."

You see the same young couple who came into the deli earlier in the day rise, and everyone claps.

"Both Sara and Dane will be missed. On a lighter note, as they say, Anders and Sheila Welden have announced that they are expecting a new arrival later this year. Congratulations to them as well. I know you're both happy. Well, unless there are any questions, that is all for now. Happy living."

The voice vanishes, and the populace begins to shuffle out of the great hall. Amy holds your hand firmly, and as you pass through the front doors, she squeezes tightly. At almost the same moment, a heavy hand lands on your shoulder and holds you gently yet firmly in place.

"Friend."

You turn to see the face of Doug smiling behind you.

"Let's have a cup of coffee to celebrate your first day at work."

"I think it's a bit late for coffee, don't you think so, too, Doug?" Amy says quickly.

Doug laughs. "I think...! I think you must want to have our new friend all to yourself, Amy. But that's okay. You can come, too."

Gladys has come around the side of both of you and taken Amy's arm in hers. She smiles broadly.

"Let's go back to our cottage," Doug says. "It will be nice and quiet out there. I'll get a nice warm fire going and brew a hot pot of oxtail soup the old-fashioned way."

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You feel relaxed and happy as Doug takes your arm and Gladys; Amy's. The four of you walk to the carriage pleasantly which is only a stone's throw away and climb in.

Chapter 4 by intellikat



(credit to Grasshopper for some content used from a previous draft)

A thin wisp of smoke rises from the cottage into the night sky.

Doug stands before you at the fireplace, stoking a small fire. To the side, an old, cast-iron stove is puffing away as well. From time to time, Doug pulls a lit piece of kindling from the fireplace and adds it to the belly of the stove. On top of the stove sits a pot.

"Well partner. Here we are, back where it all began."

"You steal a glance at Amy. Gladys is watching you both from the other side of the cottage's living room.

"We need to talk, friend."

"What is it, Doug?" You feel relaxed and calm now.

"Are you feeling comfortable?" he asks.

"Yes, very."

"Go grab a mug from the kitchen, Gladys," says Doug, and she obeys. When she returns, she hands him an old, tin cup that he fills from the pot.

"Home brew, friend," he says to you, and extends the full cup.

"You aren't drinking?" you ask, taking the cup in both hands.

"I've had enough for today."

You sip from the cup. It is warm. [See more of Story Wars](#) stuff you've been drinking so far here.

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"Decaf," Doug says, as if reading your mind. "It's decaf. Too late at night, as Amy said, to be drinking anything else."

Doug sits down across from the two of you on a recliner and sighs. He watches silently as you drink the coffee. As you sip, you feel the barrier begin to drop, and the scene begins to shift.

You are sitting in a small office, lit dimly. You and Amy are sitting on a leather couch. Plants sprawl from pots, and there is a large desk where the coffee table should be. The fireplace remains, but instead of the stove, a cabinet filled with strange vials and boxes sits.

"Tom." Doug is speaking directly to you. "How **do** you feel? Does your head hurt at all?" The name he uses causes your head to resound like a gong.

"No, no," you say. "It doesn't hurt. But it feels... strange."

"Tom. Listen carefully to what I am going to say now. It is for your good." Doug leans forward in his chair. "We had to pull you out earlier than expected, although we haven't pulled you fully out. We need to talk to you directly because your treatment is in danger of failing. Do you understand?"

"No, Doug. I don't understand. What treatment? What danger?"

"Finish your coffee."

You drink again from the mug. Your mind seems clearer now, but you still feel relaxed and comfortable, as if you are gliding through a gentle dream. The fact that your surroundings have shifted so drastically somehow does **not** unnerve you at all.

"Tom. Do you recognize Amy?"

You look over at Amy again. She has the same marks you saw in the Great Hall, though her head is now hanging low.

"Yes."

See more of Story Wars

"Who is she to you?"

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"She's... she's my new friend. And I like her very much."

“What do I need help with?”

“You’re a man... struggling with violent impulses, Tom. With your wife’s support, you’ve volunteered for a radical new treatment program. That’s where you are now. All of the visions you’ve been having are not real. They are projections; manifestations of a damaged psyche doing battle with the drugs and hypnosis that we are administering to you in an attempt to modify your behavior. The only things that are real are myself, nurse Gladys, and your wife, Amy. We are trying to help you bond once again within the safe and healing set of relationships of this projected community. None of this is real.”

Doug has walked over to Amy and gently lifts her hand.

“These missing fingers are projections of real guilt you are suffering from. Your journey down the tube represents your checking into the hospital and your willingness to accept therapy. You may even remember bits and pieces of the admission process.”

“But the effects of the coffee... you said you had pulled me out? Why am I still seeing Amy this way if I’m no longer under the effects of therapy?”

“Oh, you still are very much under the effects. We haven’t taken you out completely. Just enough to speak with you in this way. Without the defense mechanisms of your psyche working, you see your guilt feelings manifested in Amy’s injuries. so they are real in a deeper sense of the word. The journey back and forth between these two fictional worlds that you are experiencing is the very battle that your psyche is doing in an attempt to restructure itself. Some patients will recall images and memories from real life mixing with their projections. Do you remember anything from the very beginning of your first day?”

“The tube... and the grey button. That’s my first memory.”

Doug laughs.

“The call button for the hospital elevator. It took you a very long time to make that decision

That action represented your willingness to accept therapy, you know. And that is why it was the transition into this world. But it was the most critical. You must stop resisting the process and accept it. If you don’t, the treatment will be a complete failure. You may not want to, but we do. We want to help you, Tom. We want to help both you and Amy. Do you understand?”

See more of Story Wars

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"Amy? Is this true?" you ask.

Amy lowers her head, tears in her eyes, and nods in assent.

"Have you been having visions of... another side? Some kind of resistance? A manifestation of your resistance to the treatment?"

"I've received two messages warning me of danger now."

"You must ignore these, Tom. They are simply your subconscious defense mechanisms attempting to resist the therapy. You must be willing to let us help you."

You nod.

"We have to take Amy back now. You won't be able to see her until the therapy ends. Her presence, which is neither of your faults, has manifested a defense mechanism that is keeping you from bonding fully with our projected community, which represents your relationship to others in real life. To help you overcome your antisocial and psychotic tendencies, we need this process to happen smoothly, and organically. Amy was meant to be a loving presence, and a means to guide you to good," Doug looks over at Amy. "But it seems as if she is having the opposite effect. Do you understand the importance of this? You should both say your goodbyes now. You won't see one another again until the Celebration of Trappings."

"What is that?" you ask. "They mentioned it in the Great Hall."

"It is the culmination of the therapy process, **Tom**. The final step in your recovery." Doug turns to Gladys. "Would you escort our friend back to town? I will take Amy to the up-tube."

"If this is all in my mind, why all of this? An up-tube for Amy to leave from?"

"As I said, your mind is combining elements of real life as well as delusions. To not play the game with you would be a shock to your psyche. Please. You must settle into our town and be one

with us. Say your goodbyes now. You will see one another again."

See more of Story Wars

Amy is crying softly. You go to embrace her but Doug intervenes and shakes his head with a frown as if to tell you not to. You nod in return.

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Gladys drives you back into town in silence. For the entire ride, you both simply ride along through the dark night staring straight ahead, until the very last stretch before the boarding house.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“I think the effects of the decaf are wearing off,” you say, a bit hazily.

Gladys smiles.

She helps lead you up to your room, which you are now having trouble finding.

“Is this normal?” you ask, unsure of yourself now.

“Just relax,” she replies, opening the unlocked door. And entering first “This is a nice room.”

Gladys guides you over towards the bed and pushes you down on it. You start to get dizzy as she lifts your legs and removes your shoes. You lie back on the bed and see her above you, smiling playfully. When you close your eyes you feel faintly sick but then it feels as if you are rising above yourself again.

When you look down, the view is now of a smoke-filled room littered with people on the floor and against the walls. You see yourself lying on a table cluttered with trash. Gladys is half-dressed and her panties are stained with urine. She pulls off your socks and thumps the top of your foot.

“There we go baby,” she says in a rasped voice.

Gladys pushes the trash and bottles out from between your legs and places a lit candle there. She wraps a band around your ankle then takes out a baggy and pulls a wad of foil from it. She dumps the contents into a spoon then holds it over the candle. She draws the liquid into the tube then holds it up, thumping the side while pushing the grey plunger to expel the air

See more of Story Wars

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You feel yourself falling back down, but then rocket off with sparks flying behind you. When you open your eyes, you are laying on a blanket in a field of tall grass with the wind lightly blowing it around like waves on an ocean. The songbirds are singing their serenades.

Amy is standing over you wearing a nice sundress and a big white floppy hat with two glasses of red wine in her hand. You extend your arm and she lies down next to you.

"I hope this day never ends," you say to yourself.

"I can't wait until the Celebration of Trappings," Amy whispers in your ears. "I want to have you now. To myself."

You look into her beautiful eyes.

"It's almost sunset," she continues, looking off in the distance. "The Festival of Lights begins tonight, marking the four days before the Celebration. We can stay here, or we can go back into town."

You feel a dull ache in your foot. "My foot hurts too much to walk. Let's just stay here."

Amy lies in your arms and you watch as the sun sets to the east. You find that odd, but not enough to care. As darkness grows you see a sole lantern lift from the center of the square. The two of you watch it rise, then once it hits the faster winds of the atmosphere, it takes off across the sky and over you.

Amy holds you tighter and whispers in you ear, "I love this part to death".

Then you see hundreds of them lift slowly up and spread out. As they hit the same spot in the atmosphere, they take off a few at a time like colored autumn leaves flowing down the stream, spinning, twirling, and bouncing off one another as they flow out of sight.

As they drift over you, you see that one loses its flame and lands very close to you. As you pick it up, you see that there's a hole attached. You pull the hole off as Amy wraps her arms around you from behind and watches over you.

See more of Story Wars

Chapter 5 by Grasshopper

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THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE. THEY WILL TAKE YOU. YOU MUST JOIN US TONIGHT. LISTEN FOR THE BELLS. WE WILL BE IN THE TOWER. BE CAREFUL. BE AWARE!!! AMY.

You look around but Amy is gone, and so is the note. You walk back to the boarding house alone, then taking one last look around before you head up to your room. It's nice outside so you open the window to look out. The square is abandoned and dimly lit. You turn off your light, get undressed, and crawl into bed. You lay there looking about the room and eventually fall to sleep. You wake up startled. You look about the room then hear the sound of bells. You rub your eyes and the bells continue to tone as you walk to the window then they stops. It was coming from the towers of the great hall. You turn on the light and start getting dressed. You pull the pillow case and fill it with a few needed items for your trip then head downstairs.

You cross the empty square, and then enter the hall. To **the** left you can see a door that is lit from the backside. When you open the door you see a spiral staircase leading up. You slowly climb the stairs which leads to the bell tower, but there's no one there. "Damn, I'm too late" you say to yourself. You look out to see if you can find them walking away. Instead you see a bond fire burning near the grove of oak trees beyond the fields. "That must be them" you told yourself. You climb back down and start walking toward it.

You find that you are walking through a corn field, but the rows run more like a maze than straight. You can see the fire over the tops so you can keep on course as you cut between the rows. The rows start getting tighter the closer you get. They wrap themselves around you slowing you down. You start getting covered by spider webs which slows you down even more, then grasshoppers start climbing all over you. It's almost as if the field was trying to stop you. Finally you get to a part that doesn't budge so you put your shoulder to it and push with everything you've got. Eventually you bust through and into a clearing.

Now, the bond fire is right in front of you but there's no one here. As you go to sit down to wait, the flames of the fire burst high then falls back down. You watch as a glass pipe or **tube** slowly rises straight up from the fire then comes to a stop, then you watch as the flames leaves the bed of ash and travels up the pipe then stops near the top. The flame coalesces into an orb that

See more of Story Wars

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her head. Down by where her feet and knees should be, is a cascade of ashes fighting to keep shape but they are too far from the orb for proper cohesion.

"Do you know who I am Tom" she asks in a whispery voice that caused bits of ash to spew from her mouth with every word. "No..... I don't" She pauses "I am the veil for which you hide behind". As you stand there watching her flutter slightly up and down, she turns her head as if to look around then thrust her arms out knocking you to the ground. She floats over then lays down inside you. You can feel her burning throughout.

As you start to coughing, a curtain of flames to climbs up beside you. The orb leaves you and as it rises, it starts to glow brightly. As you look at the orb, your field of vision starts to breathe in and out from normal to looking through a fisheye lens.

You feel your right eye **is** being forced open as the orb gets closer and closer then starts swinging left to right. You feel your left eye being forced open in the same order. Your vision blurs as you feel yourself being lifted up and placed in a small bright white box. A mask is placed on your face and as the hands clear you see two medics standing over you. The first medic is talking with dispatch as the second one treats your wounds. "Copy dispatch. We have a male, approximately 25 to 30 years old. Minor burns on his sides and smoke inhalation. The fire looks to had started from smoking in bed. 10-50 with a possible 10-56A. At this time we are advising a code 50 to Bellevue for evaluation. 10-4" You look at their faces as they give you a shot to knock you out. They were both Amy.

When you wake you are lying against the corner of a dark room. As your eyes adjust you can see faintly see light coming from beneath a door. Then a spot light shines down on you. The rest of the room is now lit just enough to see steel cased window with the wire mesh made into the glass, and the chipping layers of powder blue and pea green lead paint on the cold concrete walls. When you look down, you see that you are wearing a straight jacket and that you have some type of foam helmet on your head. Across **the** room you see a line of light that forms into a small door. The door cracks open enough for a small nose and whiskers to pop out and starts to sniff around. A spot light shines on the door as it opens up and a small mouse dressed in a lab

coat comes out and looks around. The light follows him as he walks across the room then stops. "Are you here to Celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the Great War? Look around and with a smirk "I guess I am".

See more of Story Wars

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Suddenly other small doors appear from lines of light with hundreds of lap coated mice flow in. You start kicking as they throw balls of string across you and secure you to the floor and wall. Once the Lilliputians were satisfied with their deed, they started jumping up and down applauding and congratulating each other. Suddenly the room went dark and hush fell over them. A door formed from a golden light. A spot light on the **door** revealed the King of Rats with a jewel studded thimble for a crown, and a robe made of golden thread. The light follows him as he strolls up toward you, then the other mice knell before him. The King adjusts his glasses then unrolls a scroll. He clears his throat and proclaims "Today is the third days of days. The day of reckoning. LET THE CELEBRATION OF THE TRAPPING BEGIN"! Once again they started jumping up and down applauding and chanting "TRAPPED! TRAPPED! TRAPPED! TRAPPED!"

The King rolls back up the scroll, and hands it to one of his subjects, then he waves his scepter around you. You start to see sparks like from a blow torch cutting the floor and walls around you. As he raises his scepter, you are lifted up into what becomes a chair. The Lilliputian mice pull you by their strings near the middle of the room. The king waves a rectangle on the floor in front of you which is met with sparks, then raises the scepter and a table draws up from the floor. He waves two squares next to you and chairs rise up. Then he swings the scepter around the room and sparks fly like the room is being cut apart. The King turns to you and bows, whips his robe back **way** behind him, and leads his subjects in a march to stage left.

Doug and Gladys place their folders on the table then sit down on either side of you while the other half of the room starts to rise and is slowly replaced with an ornate 15th century library room. Doug and Gladys are discussing your treatment with two fellow doctors, Bob and Henry. With their comical Point/Counterpoint roles, they drone on endlessly, not letting you get a word **out** edgewise. "Do you have a waiver from the plaintiff for this type of treatment" Bob asks? Gladys pulls out a few pages and slides them over for which Bob and Henry take turns handing them back and forth. "All appears to be in order. You have our permission to start right away." Henry says as he slides the pages back to Doug. You cannot help but feel a heavy sense of Déjà vu. Doug and Gladys get up and leave the room while four large human sized rats in lab coats walk in, grabs you, and stand you up.

See more of Story Wars

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to darkness with the light from under the door being the only thing you can see. You watch as the shadows of the mice army run back and forth across the opening. "I've been here before. This isn't real. This is the past" you tell yourself as you curl into a ball and fall asleep.

Knock Knock Knock as a familiar rap on the door awakes you up. "Come In" you moan out. "Time to get up sleepy head" Doug says as he walks in and opens the rest of the shades. He turns and stops "Tough Night" he asks? "You don't know **the** half of it" you reply! .Doug looks down then looks at you. "I guess not" Doug replies "your shoes are all muddy".

Chapter 6 by intellikat



You look down and notice your shoes kicked off beside the bed. The image brings back faint memories of... Amy, a field, mice... so many strange things all jumbled together at once.

Doug places a fresh pair of blue clothes on your night stand and goes to the window to draw the curtain.

"I was with Amy. Somewhere overlooking the town during the Festival of Lights last night. After that, it gets a little confused in my memory."

"Festival of Lights?" Doug laughs and returns to the bedside, unscrewing the lid of a silver Thermos. "That was four days ago, friend. You've been working with Hank in the deli every day since then." He pours a brown stream of coffee into a ceramic mug and offers it to you. You take it.

"Four...? Four days ago??" You drink from the mug and your mind seems to settle down. Whatever it was that you remember in the previous night's dreams begins to fade away; like a plate being washed bright and clean once again.

"And who is Amy?" Doug goes to the door and puts his hand on the knob. "Finish up your coffee and then change into your Trapping Gown. I'll be downstairs waiting. We have to get ready. It's nearly one o'clock already."

See more of Story Wars

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citizens.

You stand before the mirror in your Trapping Gown: a light blue cloth that drops to your ankles. You have trouble at first, but are eventually able to tie off the strings in the back.

You lace up your muddy shoes and head downstairs to find Doug.

The horseless carriage takes you beyond the Great Hall and past a thick row of cornfields until you pull into a small dirt lot and get out. Doug leads you along a sandy path that cuts through the cornstalks until it reaches an empty grove carved out in the middle of it all.

At the very centre is a wooden platform or stage that has been erected; it reminds you of gallows, but without any kind of trapdoor. There is, however, a crossbeam running the length of the space above. Below, and all around the platform, young women also dressed in blue dresses are placing bundles of sticks and firewood. At the centre of the platform is something like a wooden table or altar.

"I wanted you to see this first, though we won't be here until nightfall," says Doug. "This is what you really need to see."

He motions to you and you move beyond along the path until the cornstalks grow thick and ordered. Without speaking for several minutes, you follow this path. Along the way you notice a few other citizens of the town you don't recognise. They are wearing something like a jumpsuit the colour of the corn, but with helmets of the same blue colour you are wearing.

Doug nods as you pass by these individuals, and you get the distinct sense that they are some kind of guards... or soldiers based on their solemnity and pose.

"Where are we going, Doug?"

He does not respond, but your question seems to be answered as the cornstalks clear and you find yourselves in a small clearing once again. This time, in the very centre of the space sits a

low, concrete bunker (more like a sealed greenhouse almost) that rises only a few feet above the ground. A concrete stairway (at below, the door is sealed.

Doug turns to you,

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See more of Story Wars

"Tom. It's time you came to understand what this town is about, and what your role is to be in the Celebration of Trapping."

Doug produces a thin keycard and descends the stairs. Waving it in from of a black panel to the side, he opens the door and you enter.

There in the gloom are a dozen individuals, dressed as those above but with blue berets. Some are intent upon the computer screens before them, others are moving about the room conversing in hushed tones and flipping through screens of information on handheld tablets.

"We call this place Overmind. From here we control the entire town."

Doug moves to what appears a coffeemaker recessed into one wall. He depresses a button and a tall paper cup is dispensed and begins to fill with coffee, it's scent distinctively thick in the damp air.

"You'll need to drink this now."

"But I just had a cup."

"What, are you worried about your bladder?" Doug laughs. "Drink it. It's decaf."

You do, and as you sip, you sense your head beginning to buzz and clear. The room begins to shake and suddenly change into what appears a sterile, white hospital room. Instead of soldiers, you see mice dressed in lab coats surrounding the room and a single horizontal table/bed in the centre, complete with leather straps. Instead of tablets, they are holding clipboards and are taking furtive notes with every second passed. Doug is dressed also in a lab coat, and now holds a silver tray with two tiny white cups.

"Now, take these," he says.

You move to his tray and see that one cup holds two red pills and the other: water.

"What are they?"

See more of Story Wars

"They will take you to the

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You somehow trust Doug, although it is no longer because of any kind of mind control you can discern. You take the cup of pills, and the water, and drain them both.

Almost immediately, you feel your stomach drop, like from a rollercoaster. Your body slumps to the floor and you are looking up at the ceiling. It is all stone, the shape of the tunnel, and you are racing along it at an incredible speed. Images of faces you know and those you do not, a screaming ambulance, an alley, an old church and then the Great Hall once again aflame, the cornfields aflame, Amy standing against the sunset and the turning to look at you, her face bruised and beaten.

Suddenly, there is a hand shaking you by the shoulder, and several other voices tumbling on top of one another.

"No, just wait. He doesn't need it."

"Them things will kill you if you don't have insurance. Better to put him in a taxi if he's going."

"He's coming 'round."

You pull yourself up on one elbow and scan your surroundings.

You appear to be in what looks like the side chapel of an old cathedral. Low candles are burning from their holders, and numbers of others are huddled together on pews. It doesn't look like a church service, however.

You recognise Doug beside you, although he is no longer as muscular as you remember him. He wears a pair of bifocals and a thick grey beard, but is most definitely Doug. He is the one with his hand on your shoulder.

"Tom. Do you know where you are? Do you know who I am?"

You don't say anything, put get to your hands and feet.

"Whoah, hang on, just take it easy. You've fainted. Do you remember?"

See more of Story Wars

"Doug?" you ask.

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"Yes, that's right. Do you know where you are?"

You look around at the faces, the old paintings of Christ and the disciples on the wall, the stained glass windows, the old man preparing something up near the front altar of the nave.

"It's a Thursday meeting."

Doug smiles. "That's right."

"I was sharing my story."

"Okay, okay, let's give him some room."

Doug helps you again to your feet and the other sit again.

"How long-- how long was I out for?"

"You weren't fully responsive for a few minutes, Tom. We were a bit worried about you. Have you eaten today?"

"Just the bagel."

You look over to the folding table that has been set up against the wall. A few brown bags spill bagels, while two cardboard boxes of coffee sit beside paper cups, creamer, sugar, stir sticks.

"Get him some juice, would you? You were talking about your week, Tom. How has it been? Your new job at the deli?"

Doug helps you sit down in a chair.

"Not so good," you begin. "I got fired after one day. I was hallucinating... and I must have... I don't know..." you trail off.

"Did you... act out again, Tom?"

A paper cup of orange juice is placed into your hand by another member of the group.

See more of Story Wars

"I really don't remember, Doug."

"Have you seen Amy this week?"

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Amy. The name floods you with memories and emotions, all of them seeming clearer than any of those from the vivid dreams now flowing away from you. You begin to cry.

"It's okay, Tom. Take your time."

"I've been trying. I really have. Some days are better than others. But... but I can't help myself sometimes. I got up this weekend. A woman I met at the unemployment office named Gladys. We went back to some place... some abandoned warehouse in the Bronx. It was... horrible."

"Yes, that's good, Tom."

"When I'm high, I can't tell what's real and what's the trip anymore. Sometimes I think I'm awake and I'm really dreaming. Not the trip, I mean... I mean real dreams at night. Or maybe I'm high and unconscious. I don't know anymore. I could be dead and not even know it anymore."

"And how does this all make you feel?"

"I feel. I feel like an absolute piece of shit."

You begin to sob uncontrollably and the entire place goes silent as your cries echo off the walls.

"I'm about... this close to ending things. It's a living nightmare. I... I think I killed a homeless man in an alley this week. The night it rained. I... I remember..."

"It's okay, Tom," Doug has his hand on your shoulder again. "You haven't done anything wrong."

"Wha-- what?"

"You haven't done anything wrong. You've done exactly what we've asked you to do. Once you complete your final step, all your conflict will drain away. That which you call conscience and guilt will no longer clutch at you. Your descent into this darkness will be complete and you will have peace. Peace, Tom."

You look up and see the others around you nodding in assent.

See more of Story Wars

"Come!"

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Doug helps you up and leads you to the confining aisle of the cathedral where you walk together toward the stone altar at the apse where an old man has his back to you, working away at

something.

"This is what we ceremoniously call The Celebration of Trapping, Tom. We all went through this process as you are now. And we all are here to support you now."

The old man draws back, and there, sitting on the altar is a gutted pig on a gleaming silver tray. The old man is holding a carving knife, the same as you now remember from the deli.

"Carve the flesh, as you know how, Tom."

Doug nods at you, and you take a deep breath. Your eyes move to the great ceiling of the chapel above you, and you notice a broad wooden beam crossing the expanse, just as you saw on the raised platform in the cornfield. Your eyes dart down and you see bundles of sticks and firewood poking out from beneath the pews around you.

"Let us celebrate the animal trapped here before us now, Tom. They caught you once. They tried to treat you with their drugs and their psychotherapy. But now you are free. Free to be who you truly are. Who we are, together. Take the knife, Tom. And do what you were made to do."

You look around at the faces surrounding you. They seem poised and ready to join you in spirit.

You grasp the knife firmly in one hand and suddenly the scene changes, without coffee, without pills.

You are in a darkened room, half-framed and littered with construction tools.

Amy is lying on the floor, her arms and legs tied with duct tape. Tears are streaming down her bruised and beaten face. She is trying to crawl; to inch away.

In your hand is the knife.

You hear the voices in your head.

"Be one with us."

See more of Story Wars

"Tom, please. You don't have to do this. You don't have to do this. You can still choose. Please, Tom, please. You can still choose. Please, Tom, please. You can still choose. Please. Choose something else. Your life is yours. You can't change your past, but you can change your

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future. This is what separates us from animals, Tom. Please. Remember what we worked on in your sessions, Tom. Remember your progress, Tom. You don't have to do this, Tom," says Amy, choking on her tears.

Chapter 7 by intellikat



Tom Skelton drew the knife's keen edge along Amy's soft neck and watched the folds of skin separate and the red blood spill warm and thick into the palms of his hands. Her eyes grew wide and Tom looked to see and drink in this brief intoxicating moment for him-- this Eucharistic ecstasy that had taken so much to obtain. When then her orbits went dull and her spirit fled, his heart rate began to dive and his breathing slowed. To worship this way happened only once or twice a year, and there was a sudden sadness that rushed upon him with its ending. The trapping of a victim and the days leading up to this dark celebration were the only things that gave him purpose. The following months would be spent in hiding—a slow epilogue to his story. He would remain below ground, as it were, only to resurface some time later for his next victim.

Amy had been his analyst. Not an intended victim, at first. Their relationship, both in and out of her office had been months in the making. He was an attractive man, and for all the woman she was, she was yet lonely in that great city and vulnerable for having a heart still optimistic for love in any of its manifestations. People assume that "professionals": doctors and such are somehow more rational than we, but it is not so. We all make the same mistakes. We all share the same weaknesses.

Their first date had been at a coffee shop. Awkward, yet sufficient. She had dropped by the deli where he worked several days later. Once the choice had been made... that button pressed, their arrival together at the bottom was inevitable. Whenever he drank that coffee with her he felt alive. Free. The smell of the shop he equated with profound pleasure.

He had chosen her, indeed. And yet she had changed him in the process. What once had been the clearest of methods had become cloudy. Had it been their sessions together in that office or their time spent without? Some buzzing filled his head every time they met at their coffee shop

to talk, her soft hand atop his then. His purpose began to feel blunted, the sharp edge not so anymore. His nights were restless. He stopped attending church and even Thursday prayer meetings in the deli, although he would not have known he had even stopped drinking and injecting.

But then the voices returned. Something with one another.

See more of Story Wars

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He couldn't discern waking from sleeping. Dreams within dreams it seemed—his psyche battling on multiple fronts to make sense of the differing thoughts and feelings that were raging within. It constructed fantasies for him: escapes into other lives to try and contain the inconsistencies rather than be torn apart. It tried to make sense of his reality, which made no sense at all.

And then Amy had learned his secret. He had, in fact told her in their final session together.

Her response had not been what he had hoped for.

An former patient at Bellevue Hospital. A drug addict. A schizophrenic. A murderer...

What had he expected?

Had he been sane, he would not have been surprised by her response. But everything had seemed so perfect. She was so perfect to him. He could not believe his luck. Luck had lowered his defenses.

And so...

She lay at his feet now.

Empty.

He knelt beside her.

And he gutted her, as he had the others. Vera Nichols. Sara and Dane Abrams. And more.

The voices were still now. His multiple realities coalesced into one.

Satisfied.

He was one with them

The voices.

The buzzing had stopped.

See more of Story Wars

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The town had disappeared.

He knew who he was once again.

Tom appeared from the rear of the house, hauling a large duffel bag.

He had made his way in the wet and the dark to the front yard when the sweep of lights rushed him from the street beyond. But the men that sprang from their vehicles and trained their weapons upon him had arrived too late.

As Tom stood in the downpour with his hands clutching the strap of the bag, he savored having taken his part in this final celebration. The men shouted for him to make his way to the earth below as the rain cascaded off their helmets, and the lights spun and flashed wildly like bonfire flames in the night.

Chapter 8 by intellikat



"Decaf for me," said Doug, standing by the grey door leading into the interrogation room. He sighed deeply and looked at his reflection in the empty plexiglas frame hanging from the wall. He wasn't sleeping well these days.

The cop by the door nodded and began to pour from a glass pot with an orange neck. He said nothing, but simply watched the psychologist from below a steeped cap.

"Go ahead." Doug nodded. "Say it."

The officer looked down and finished pouring.

"You think I'm going to push for insanity."

The cop handed him the styrofoam cup full of steaming coffee. "I think you're going to push for insanity."

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"He was under my care for a time, yes. In a sense. Voluntarily."

"I just want him out of here. Fast," the officer growled.

Doug simply nodded and entered the cell as the cop opened it for him.

In the room, Tom sat handcuffed to the table. He looked up when Doug entered, and a smile crept across his face.

"Doug..."

"Tom. You remember me?"

"Of course. I'm happy to see you."

"When was the last you remember seeing me, Tom?"

"At the Celebration, of course. You and the others."

"Tell me more about the Celebration."

"Oh, we've celebrated many times now."

"About how many times, Tom?"

"Twice with you. And before that... six more."

Doug noted the number in his head. "And who else was at the Celebration with you?"

"Well. The others, of course. I don't know all their names."

"Do you interact with them... talk with them?"

"They talk to me."

"What do they say?"

Tom smiled. "Lean closer."

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Doug paused. "Excuse me, Tom?"

"Lean in closer, Doug... and I'll tell you what they say to me."

Doug looked at Tom's hands, cuffed to table. He leaned in.

"Closer. So that I can whisper it in your ear."

Doug leaned all the way over the table, and in that moment Tom whispered, **I know why you can't sleep at night, Doug.**

Doug jerked back. His eyes fixed themselves on Tom, and though the man's voice continued speaking in Doug's head, his lips did not move. A wild smile was plastered across his face.

The voices call to you as well, don't they? Be one with us, Doug.

Doug sprang from his chair and banged on the grey door. The cop on duty opened it and Doug paced a ways down the hallway and returned.

"You alright, sir?"

Doug looks at the coffee machine sitting on the small table. "I'm done for today."

The words of Tom Skelton echoed through Doug's mind as he lay in bed. A bottle of sedatives lay open on his bedside table. The apartment was still and empty, as it had been since his wife had left him, except for the low fire still burning in the bedroom hearth.

What had Tom meant? How could he have known? Had he even said the words that Doug had heard? Tom's memory should have been erased. None of this should be happening.

"My hallucinations are just getting stronger. That must be it. That's all," Doug thought to himself. "A side effect, that's all, of sleeplessness. I need to sleep. I'm running on almost no sleep. I need to sleep."

And then, the sedatives took hold.

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There was a knock on the heavy wooden door of the side chapel.

Doug stops from his talking to the group and goes to see who is there. Opening the door, he looks around the corner to see a man dripping wet and turning blue from the cold in the rain.

"Come and sit inside," he says, and the man follows. "Partner, you look like you could use a hot cup o' joe."

Doug goes to the plastic folding table and fills two steaming styrofoam cups with rich black coffee. He moves over towards the man, who has sat down amongst the others and is warming up. Doug hands him one of the cups.

"So, did you see the invitation in the Times?" Doug asks. "Sure you did. That's just fine... I can see you found your way here-- it's a rare occasion when someone actually gets lost on the way here, but I'm just glad you made it tonight. Aw, everyone is glad you're here, I'm sure!" The group nods and claps among murmurs of affirmation. "After you get warmed up, I'll give you the papers that you need to sign to... ah... allow us to prescribe medication to you free of charge." You smile. "Yup, you're sure going to like it here."

The downs the last of the coffee, and looks around.

"I'm Doug," says the large man in the center, offering his hand. "Dr. Doug Lytton."

"Tom," says the man from out of the cold. "Tom Skelton."

.....

The silver door slides open and the CIA director enters the space of the underground control room, flanked by two armed guards in blue helmets.

"Director Dumfries," says Doug, rising from a monitor in the gloom to greet her.

"You can call me Gladys here, Doug," she replies. "There are no formalities in Overmind."

He nods.

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There in the humming room, some are silent. Some are intent upon the computer screens before them, others are moving about the room conversing in

hushed tones and flipping through screens of information on handheld tablets.

"I've come for an update."

"I know. Everything is going according to schedule. The two have developed a relationship. All of it is believable. And I'll be there to help close the case as well."

"Amazing." Gladys is surveying the work of the room, and the many monitors focused in on grainy individuals in hospital gowns restricted to sterile rooms.

"His psyche was absolutely in tatters when we found him two years ago. A former patient at Bellevue Hospital. A drug addict. A schizophrenic. Violent. Erratic. All we had to do was stitch the narratives together into one whole that would keep his conscious mind at bay. Believable enough to withstand initial probing. When the mind reaches a certain limit... when its confusion is total, it will accept any narrative that makes some kind of coherent sense. That is what we did for him. He's been consistent in five operations so far."

"Where did you find him?"

"With the others. From the chapel pickup. Answered a classified ad in the Sunday Times for free counseling and therapy on Thursday nights. He signed himself away. Seems like it wasn't the first time. He's nothing; a nobody. No one will miss him. He a slider... slipping away from society."

"The timeline is short."

"I know."

"Primaries are almost here."

"You needn't worry."

"I'm not the one worried."

"You can tell the Senator that everything will be taken care of. That analyst who has threatened to go public won't be a problem." See more of Story Wars

"There can be no loose ends."

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"There won't be. I promise you." Doug goes to a separate monitor, which displays a couple asleep in bed together.

"Is that them?"

"Yes."

Gladys leans in to look at the monitor. "Oh, Dr. Meltzer. Dr. Amy Meltzer. Why couldn't you have just kept your mouth shut? You've gotten yourself in deeper than you could have imagined.

.....

Doug awoke from his dreams of the past.

He looked at his watch by the bedside. 2:10am.

There had been a noise downstairs.

Doug climbed from his bed and stole toward the door. The fire had burned down low in the hearth; barely a crackle now.

At the the top of the stairway he stood, overlooking the entryway to the apartment. The front door was ajar; its glass pane shattered.

In that moment, all he could think of was if he had somehow done something wrong. Was there some reason the agency would want him dead now?

From out of the dark, Hank Simonson stole, laying a cold blade against Doug's exposed neck.

Hello, Doug. Remember me? said the man, and drew the knife viciously across his neck.

As Doug slumped to the floor, and in his final moments of fleeting life, he remembered his meeting with the CIA and agreement to join with Project Overmind over two years before.

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Doug had remembered the sounds of cathedral bells suddenly ringing out in the distance to signal the hour, and something in his mind has considered it an omen; a message somehow from the Almighty calling him away from this dark business.

But in the next moment he had shaken Director Dumfries' hand.

Images of flames began to coalesce in Doug's eyes now as the oxygen was depleted from his brain.

The apartment aflame now.

Everything destroyed.

He thought he heard bells ringing.

And the slide continued deeper into the bowels of the earth as the rocks around began to glow a fierce red and the air became thick and acrid. Doug was approaching some great cavern now filled with lava flowing in an eternal circle around a massive cliff face rising from the deep... ever circling. He screamed out but no sound came. His fingers clawed at the slide, but there was nothing to hold onto. When he fell into the lake of fire, it burned but he did not die. Screaming out in silent and endless agony, Doug circled the rock mountain eternally in a flow of tortured souls.

Atop a highest peak, a figure watched all those forever trapped below, its face ever shrouded.

...

the end

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